

SPRNCA – Alternatives Development

Field Trip: Recreation

April 4, 2014 (8:30am – 3pm)

Participants:

- Betty Snider, Community Watershed Alliance
- Leon Watson
- Robert Weissler, Friends of the San Pedro River
- Kristin Terpening, AGFD
- Steve Saway, Huachuca Hiking Club
- Rion Bowers, City of Sierra Vista and Cochise County
- Glenn Minuth, Cochise College
- Carol Moore
- Jeff Lark, The Nature Conservancy
- Karen Simms, BLM
- David McIntyre, BLM
- Amy Markstein, BLM
- Jim Mahoney, BLM
- Heather Swanson, BLM
- Julia Sittig, SDR (Facilitator)

Stop 1: San Pedro House- Recreation, Education, and Interpretation

Overview

- Recreation discussion includes education, visual resources management, wilderness characteristics, travel and transportation, and Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR).
- 1989 San Pedro River Riparian Management Plan (the most current land use plan) listed plans for the development of a large number of recreational facilities; most have been implemented, but some have not as the BLM became more educated and familiar with the SPRNCA and its resources:
 - Management ended up questioning compatibility of a 50-unit campground and rebuilding of Del Valle Road; this RMP can revisit these issues.
- The intention of the RMP is to implement what is viable—taking into consideration impact analyses and available resources.
- The Friends of the San Pedro (“Friends”) have existed since the designation of SPRNCA- core part of mission is to provide guided tours and events:
 - Weekly river walks, bird walks (every week or two), history walks, special events (Festival of Arts, Boy Scouts, Mud Party).
 - Contribute an estimated 10,000 volunteer hours/yr to SPRNCA.

Are the decisions not to implement parts of the old RMP recorded?

Some were recorded, but not all.

The San Pedro House (SPH) is renowned, and visitors expect to have amenities; campgrounds may be appropriate.

- Campgrounds can be considered; “camp areas” managed by a site host could be feasible, and campgrounds with full amenities would require resources that BLM may not have. Also, infrastructure can encourage destructive behaviors, especially for sites like the SPH that are near the highway. In addition, if sites on the SPRNCA aren’t suitable for campsites, camping on BLM land nearby the SPRNCA could be prioritized under the existing Safford RMP.

What is the cost associated with the Miller campsite?

- Not much; the park ranger only needs to clean the bathrooms and pick up trash. The largest cost associated with the backcountry campground is the cost to pump the vault toilet, which occurs twice a year.
- The SPH site host also opens the gate at Murray Springs and Millville.
- There is a separate site host at Fairbank.

Boquillas Ranch could make a great campground.

- The current Riparian Management Plan says to restrict visitor use of Boquillas Ranch; it has traditionally been used by professionals, scientists, and management, and vehicle use is not encouraged. It has been, and would be, difficult to manage the increase in OHV and four-wheel use across the entire SPRNCA. However, these specifications could be changed in the new RMP.

Does the SPRNCA have any groundwater monitoring wells?

- Yes, we have a number of them. More details will be discussed at the upcoming Hydrology field trip.

Have you considered establishing a permitting system for Del Valle Road?

- No, the current permit system is on a case-by-case basis. You need a Special Recreation Permit (SRP) to drive on the road. Groups have obtained permits for consistent use. A Programmatic environmental assessment (EA) would help to develop a permitting program that would balance resource uses and demands. However, enforcing permits would be difficult because of lack of capacity for rangers and law enforcement on the roads.

Do you have consistent numbers for visitor use?

- No- we have estimates, but cannot measure exact use because traffic counters get stolen. Estimates can be found using counts from nearby BLM areas such as the Ironwood National Monument.
- The Friends do record numbers for visitors to the SPH.

Stop 2: Del Valle Road- Visual Resource Management (VRM)

Overview

- **Visual resources** are managed for scenic quality, wilderness characteristics, amount of visitation, and other components by classifying the quality of an area's viewsheds (area visible from a particular location); the more pristine the viewshed, the lower the class number
 - Ex: Class 1 viewsheds include areas with wilderness characteristics, and are managed to preserve their existing character with minimal management actions
- VRM classification of an area affects the amount of visible management activities allowed
- **Most current information on SPRNCA visual resources:** BLM recently conducted a Visual Resources Inventory of SPRNCA to classify viewsheds (**completed in 2013- BLM will post on website**)
 - Public input was utilized
 - High-quality views exist from Del Valle Road and other areas of the SPRNCA



Questions and discussion

Since there is a primary trail system (along Del Valle Road) and a secondary trails system (closer to the river), could we classify Del Valle Road as an area for heavier use, and have a backcountry zone for limited use?

- It would depend on the Visual Resource Management Class of Del Valle Road. Currently, the only vehicle use permitted on the road is administrative use or by SRP. If the VRM Class is a Class I or II, then it would be inconsistent to support development along the main trail system. If the VRM Class is Class III or IV, then more flexibility would be allowed for use of Del Valle Road. VRM Class decisions are made in the RMP and take into account the Visual Resource Inventory (VRI).

Does US Border Patrol (USBP) have access to Del Valle Road? If so, do their vehicles incur impacts on SPRNCA resources?

Yes, USBP is permitted to drive on any road within the SPRNCA. During emergencies, such as when they are in pursuit of anyone displaying illegal behaviors, they can drive anywhere. They have been observed going off road during non-emergency situations. Vehicles cause damage to vegetation, soils, and other resources.

Is there an inter-governmental agreement in place that requires USBP to mitigate the damage they cause?

- No, an inter-governmental agreement would have to occur at a higher organizational level than the current efforts being made to mitigate USBP damage. BLM staff and law enforcement work to educate USBP about the impacts of driving off-route.
- The Friends did submit a comment during the RMP Scoping Period that a higher level of government be involved in controlling route proliferation damage.
- Other agencies and professionals, e.g. USGS and scientific researchers, who drive on the SPRNCA have caused damage by driving off designated routes. During the SPRNCA Travel Management Planning (TMP) process, which will happen concurrently with the RMP, agencies will identify the routes they need to drive on, and all other areas will be closed to motorized vehicles. The updated rules for motorized vehicles from the TMP process will hopefully facilitate mitigation of off-route driving damage.

Have there been problems with USBP agents leaving gates unlocked on the SPRNCA?

- No, everyone has been responsible about locking gates behind them.

Will there be rules in the RMP about how low airplanes can fly above the SPRNCA?

- The Federal Aviation Administration regulates how low airplanes can fly. Flight policies are being investigated with the Federal Aviation Administration.
- The Friends submitted a Scoping comment that recommended no overflight of the SPRNCA unless a special use permit is acquired.

Does the fact that much of the SPRNCA was once used for agriculture detract from its wilderness characteristics?

- No- wilderness characteristics are identified by the present, not past, conditions.

3rd Stop: Miller Backcountry Campsite- Wild and Scenic Rivers Designation

Overview

- The Miller Backcountry campsite has been used by Boy Scouts and other groups. It is the only area on the SPRNCA that has a fire ring besides Fairbank. The campsite provides great access to the river.
- One example of a recreation related issue in the RMP is the secondary trail system. Currently, the secondary trails are closed to motorized use, the trail footprint is six feet wide. The Miller Backcountry campsite falls on this trail, and it could be developed further; however, more development could encourage vehicle use.



- Options for the RMP include keeping or changing the amenities at the Miller Backcountry campsite, and designating the secondary trails system for use by non-motorized or motorized use, closing trails, and monitoring the trails system.
- **A Wild and Scenic River (WSR)** designation means that the designated section of river must be managed to support its resource values. A section of river can be designated if it has Outstandingly Remarkable Values under the categories of Wild, Scenic, or Recreation.
 - In 1993, the San Pedro River was found to be eligible for its Recreation value. However, it was never officially designated as a Wild and Scenic (W&S) section by Congress.
 - Resource values have increased since 1993; agricultural and road use have since become less apparent.
- RMP can specify the management of the San Pedro to support its resource values and advocate for the official W&S designation.
 - A challenge would be delineating the appropriate ways to access the river (motorized vehicles, trails, ADA access).
- **Most current information on San Pedro WSR designation:** SPRNCA staff have identified the river corridor, and have begun to inventory it according to the national guidelines for Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The inventory report will be finished this year.
- **Information needed:** How wide is the corridor in a W&S designation?

Questions and discussion

The map of the river corridor and its resource values shows that small lengths of river differ in their values. Are you going to manage every little stretch of river in a different way?

- We will probably generalize the data we've found. The generalizations and their associated management actions can be influenced in the RMP. We will protect the resources without deviating from the management policy.

What are the rules surrounding motorized wheelchair access to the river, and on existing trails?

- The American Disabilities Act (ADA) governs the requirements for ADA access. For areas that do not allow motorized use, the machines used must be proven to be an extension of the body. It is possible that trails on the SRPNCA are accessible by motorized wheelchair.

Comment: We will have to consider the Gray Hawk and Yellow-Billed Cuckoo in the management plan.

Comment: Encouraging use of the river by allowing increased access may divert traffic away from the SPH.

Comment: Opening up the backcountry areas to camping and hiking would facilitate use by youth- they often like to go as far into nature as possible.

What types of youth-oriented programs exist on the SPRNCA?

- Youth have come from all over the world to visit the SPRNCA. They could hear about it through a variety of sources- magazines, the Internet, or conservation literature. School programs have come to camp and take tours, learn about birding. Conservation crews work on restoration. University field trips are also popular.
- A potential option for the future is having a high school or college class use the RMP as a project- first to learn about the political process, and then to study the natural resource issues in the field.

4th Stop: Valle Road- Wilderness Characteristics

Overview:

- The SPRNCA has no designated wilderness areas, but areas could be managed for Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC) (see map for definition of LWC).
- Areas with wilderness characteristics have little “active” management; the concept is to let the land remain pristine.
 - Management actions that would support wilderness characteristics include removal or decrease in grazing or prohibitions on motorized travel.
- Wilderness characteristics on the SPRNCA have increased since its designation, with the removal of agriculture and decrease in motor vehicle use.
- RMP: suggestions to manage for wilderness characteristics will limit the degree of development and intensity of management activities in the designated areas.
- **Most current information on SPRNCA wilderness characteristics:** Boquillas Ranch and West Del Valle units were identified as meeting the size requirements but were found to not possess wilderness characteristics as stated in the current San Pedro River Riparian Management Plan/EIS. However a new inventory has been done and identified four units within the SPRNCA which do indeed have wilderness characteristics

Discussion

If we decide to manage an area for wilderness characteristics in the RMP, would we be limited in the methods used for managing native vegetation?

- Yes, the desirable management methods for vegetation management should be considered before deciding to manage an area for wilderness characteristics. One option is to manage for wilderness characteristics at first, and adjust the designations if more extreme action is needed to maintain ecosystem health.

What if we designate an area for wilderness characteristics, and then the adjoining non-BLM land is developed? Would we still manage that area for wilderness characteristics?

- Yes, we would have to put extra effort into keeping the area pristine if development were to occur. One strategy for dealing with potential future development is buffers- perhaps we could manage almost all of an area for wilderness characteristics, but leave edges available for more active management in case development occurs on the other side.

What is the difference between wilderness characteristics and an officially designated Wilderness area?

- Wilderness areas are designated through an act of Congress; it is difficult and time-consuming to get an area designated for Wilderness. The highest degree of conservation and protection possible without an official designation is being managed for wilderness characteristics. In this case, management actions must support the wilderness characteristics; however, the decision to manage for wilderness characteristics can change over time. The new RMP for SPRNCA will include fresh decisions on wilderness characteristics.

How do you define “naturalness?” “Naturalness” means being influenced mostly by natural (as opposed to human) forces. The definition is fairly subjective, but in a management context, it means allowing the forces of nature to determine the functioning of a system.

5th Stop: Railroad Corridor- Right of Ways

Overview

- The railroad corridor is currently owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, but could be a hiking trail under certain conditions.
- The corridor has not been used by trains for several years, but was never officially considered “abandoned” because the property received yearly extensions on filing for abandonment.
- The 1989 SPRNCA Riparian Management Plan directed managers to pursue gaining the corridor for recreational use of the land if the opportunity arose, but the trail was never pursued.
- In 2012, Union Pacific bought the unused corridor, but has not built rails. It would cost \$1.2 million per mile to bring the track up to industry standards, so it may not be economically beneficial for the railroad to be built in the near future.
- **Possibilities for using the corridor as a trail:** BLM could consider purchasing the property, or obtaining a right-of-way (ROW) from Union Pacific for “interim trail use” while the railway is nonexistent.
 - However, it would hurt Union Pacific to agree for recreationalists to use the corridor for a few years, and then have to turn them away when they begin railroad construction.
 - RMP could direct the BLM to discuss options for a ROW or purchase with Union Pacific. However, this idea was pursued in the past, and a plan never materialized.

- Options for the RMP: Pursue purchasing corridor or obtain a ROW; do not take any action for this potential trail; specify that this corridor cannot be widened (so that the railroad may not be able to be modernized and rebuilt).

Discussion

Does BLM have a ROW at any point in the railroad corridor, or on any railroad corridors on the SPRNCA?

- BLM has no ROW on this railroad. As far as other corridors, the Lands and Realty specialist is investigating the existing ROWs.

Are there any ROWs currently on the SPRNCA?

- The 1989 Riparian Management Plan specifies that only certain ROWs are allowed. The next RMP will revisit the ROW options, so comments are welcome on the details of how many and what types of ROWs should be allowed.

Comment: It's possible that this railroad will never be re-established, because Douglas and Nogales corridors may be more heavily used for carrying minerals than railways.

Conclusion/Debrief

-Suggestion: Post information about the RMP process at the SPH

Information to advertise: Written comments are welcome; hydrology (May 9th, 2014) and cultural resources field trips are upcoming.

-Suggestion: Make sure to distribute info on field trips to entire email distribution

-Including the TMP process within the RMP planning may extend the amount of time required to finish the RMP, but it could be more efficient for writing the TMP.

-Good to have facilitation and notetaker at field trips.

-Concern: All the resource issues for the SPRNCA have not been covered in public settings, such as the right to carry firearms.

-Concern: After alternatives have been developed, there may not be many engagement opportunities for the public.

- Suggestion: Keep public in the loop after alternatives have been developed with another large public meeting, plus other events to serve as communication meetings (not necessarily to gain input).